Elizaville, N.Y. late June. from Bruce Baillie

Dear Everybody,

Was down in Alabamee recently. Will Hindle was burglarized, way out in the country, while doing show in N.Y. this winter. Lost original Bolex, among other irreplaceable tools.

I've been trying to get through to the film community to ask people showing films to please donate proceeds of one show this summer and send to: Steve Aronson, American Federation of the Arts, 41 E. 65th St., NYC, 10021. I have asked the Pittsburgh Filmmakers to dupe and mail such a request (for a comrade in need), using the Carnegie mailing list. Also to Canyon for a showing, also several NYC sources. No response. Are we engaged with communications or are we not!?

I miss everyone out there and the West herself, but here we are, and the days here are good, the birds sing and so on. We are shooting the last section to my last film, the Romance. It is called, The Cardinal's Visit. Elliot Caplan and I working together. If fall shows any basic life stability, the long process of putting the whole work together should be underway.

Best to all--B.B.

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CHICK STRAND AT THE CINEMATHEQUE

San Francisco Art Institute March 6, 1980

Question: The title SOFT FICTION seems to imply that there is a manifestation between documentary and narrative fiction…

Chick: Well, that could be it. I chose SOFT FICTION because the film is dealing with memory, and memory does change…becomes soft around the edges… The reality then is changed. And too, true, the line between fiction and reality is soft… The more media we get, the less we know where it is.

Q: The women that told the stories did they ever tell you those same stories prior to being filmed, or was that the first time?

C: Not exactly. The whole film started out when I was at an art show, and the first woman, the woman that felt herself turning into this bannister…we were walking out, going down the stairs and there was a wooden bannister. And she said, "Oh, this really reminds me of the time I felt myself turning into a bannister." She's an English professor. [audience laughter] And I thought, this is a really bizarre story, I have simply got to film it. Then people would ask, "What are you working on?" and I would tell them. And they'd say, "Well I have a story." Then they would jump into their stories. For instance, the heroin woman said, "Oh, I was addicted to heroin in New York…" and then I would say, "Stop, don't tell me anymore. Wait til we get the camera,"

because I wanted it really fresh. So that's how it happened. Or I would hear rumors about someone. But these women are dear friends… We all have stories . . .[pause]… Any other questions?… Am I off the hook so easy?

Q: Was that a true story about the cowboys?

C: All those stories are true. [audience laughter] All those stories are true. And every one of them was filmed with the woman whose story it was except for the one about the cowboys, and that was another woman reading a letter from the woman who had the experience.

Q: Why didn't the woman whose story it was tell it?

C: I didn't ask her that, I just agreed that I wouldn't show her or get her name involved…she wanted to be anonymous. The others didn't care.

Q: Did the women have anything to do with choosing the setting that they would tell their stories in?

C: No. Except for the nude woman in the kitchen, the setting was usually my house. I wanted it dark and subdued and it was also chosen because I could borrow a sync-sound camera; I usually hand-hold everything but that camera was too heavy so I had to put it on a tripod. I also wanted to make it real easy for myself to relate to the woman I was shooting. And that was to me one of the most incredible parts of making the film, was my relationship to the women when they were talking and being on camera, and doing it knowing the result, knowing that they would be on this big screen and a lot of people, strangers, would see them. It was intense and amazing to film them. More than anything else… Unbelievable. Just unbelievable. And them telling it on camera acted as an exorcism, in a way, for the experiences that they had. They all felt better. And when I showed it in L.A. most of them came to the show, and the audience knew that they were there; and it was an incredible experience.

Q: There was no symbolic intention between the abstractness, the camera movement, and the rigidity of the monologue?

C: Not that I was aware of at the time. There might be…it might just be a part of me. But I think mainly and frankly it was because the camera was very heavy and I didn't want to hold it. I wanted to be able to move away from the camera and not concentrate too much on camera moves, to be able to relate to the women, to encourage them by my facial expressions so they could speak to me rather than just the camera. Usually it was the woman and me and the camera in the room and that was it.

Q: There was one woman that was not filmed in sync-sound…

C: Oh, the woman in the kitchen. Right. Well, I know why she isn't talking to the camera… I filmed her early on and I wasn't sure when I could get sync equipment…and I didn't really want every one to be straight on like that. So she told me her story on tape. She was a student of mine, she told it to me over the course of three evenings, several times. And so I had the tape, I

had her voice, I had the story. And I always wanted to experiment a little with 'in time,' real time things, so that seemed like the opportune moment. I wanted to shoot her doing something in its entirety, without cuts.

Q: It is curious about her. She's nude and exposing herself so thoroughly while she goes about making herself breakfast; and then on the soundtrack over that she is telling the story about an incestuous relationship with her grandfather. There is a lot to see there…

C: I wanted her to appear vulnerable but strong…just in the way she moves through the world…not trying to look good…with no pretensions. So we both talked about how she would appear and we came up with the idea of her in the nude, making breakfast…a sort of ritual.

Q: And how about the woman who dropped the suitcase?

C: She also told me a story which I didn't use about an acid trip that she had that was quite devastating. I didn't use it, didn't film it, but I used her. I see Amy, the woman with the suitcase, the woman on the train, and she's the woman behind the waterfall at the end, as the traveller, the woman on a journey, the woman completing it all, the woman coming out the other end whole…and more than whole, with the addition of coping with the experience and making it constructive. It's hard for me to explain because I don't deal with my films that way…analyzing them beforehand…but it's sort of as if she and the other women take the responsibility for having had the experience. It's not that they take the responsibility for the experience happening, but for 'having had' it.

Q: The woman who is travelling, she comes to your house and she's knocking on the windows, and you're obviously there with the camera. I kept wondering why you wouldn't let her in. [audience laughter]

C: Why I wouldn't let her in? She talks too much. [audience laughter] No, I don't know. I just had this funny idea. I don't know what possessed me to do that. I thought it would be a good idea. She came and knocked and rattled the door. It might be because I had a pan that started upstairs and went down and ended up on that woman. It seems to me I was thinking I wanted somehow to connect the knocking with that. I like the idea of wandering through houses that seem empty and locked, secluded…with no way of entry.

Q: Yeah. After the wandering through the house I got a very clear idea of you with the camera so that it seemed like she's looking in but then on the other hand…

C: Right, see she's me…on the outside curious and trying to get in. But then I'm also the camera and on the inside too.

Q: That bothered me too. It seemed like you were protecting the chambered walls of your privacy…

C: That's part of it, yeah.

Q: ...but then what about the woman in the chair?

C: In the chair. You mean why is she there?

Q: Yeah and oblivious to the camera.

C: Well, another silly thing happened. We were there filming her for the bannister story and gradually it dawned on me, oh I'd better get a pan of the house, because we'll be moving soon. So I went upstairs while she was sitting downstairs and I started panning the house, I just kept coming and coming and she was there in the chair and I just panned over her. I had every intention of cutting before her or maybe not using it, I didn't know...perhaps it's not as random as that. I have ideas and even write them down but in the course of working on the film it might change.

Q: It was good. I thought it enriched the whole...

C: Yeah, I'm just convinced that if it's...it's some sort of obsession to me to make films and I'm convinced that it works out. There's a lot of stuff I shoot that's dumb and stupid and I never use, and doesn't relate. But somehow, funny things happen, or appear. I just know not to put it off, but to follow the feeling I have about it at the moment. And I guess it's sort of a zen attitude. Not to push too much. It'll come.

Q: On the moving shot of the woman riding horseback, did you shoot that from a car going alongside?

C: There are two women in that scene. I love to shoot with the telephoto lens, six feet away. So I had them ride, as well as they could, six feet away from me and I just followed them...and got what I could. I got dizzy a lot.

Q:: How did you shoot FEVER DREAM? That was beautiful.

C: I shot that one in the ivy in the front yard.

Q: Could you discuss the making of FEVER DREAM?

C: Yes. FEVER DREAM is very explicit. I think most women...I don't know, I do, I'm not gay but I do have sexual fantasies about other women. And that's what that's about. Did you get that? [audience laughter] But there is also an element of mystery and love between two people...a gentleness and tenderness. That's the image.

Q: Could you talk about KRISTALLNACHT?

C: KRISTALLNACHT, Yes. Um...I don't know why but I'm still obsessed by all of that...the holocaust. I suppose because it still goes on. And Anne Frank to me is symbolic of all innocent victims, male and female. And that to me...the film is just sort of a memorial to her and to all people who get caught up in things out of their control and done under... Two or three years ago

I went to her house in Amsterdam. I'd never been to Europe before so the places I had imagined as a young girl during the war when the news came back from the campus had remained in my mind…stuck in past time. And of course Anne Frank's diary affected me a great deal. So when I went to Amsterdam I could just, I just, I took all away the present and I could just hear those hobnail boots down that street; and when I went to the place where she had been hidden in the attic, I was just chilled. So that experience is relatively recent to me. KRISTALLNACHT too, refers to night in which there was a mass killing of Jews because someone in the Nazi party had been killed so they just went to the ghetto and started killing people. KRISTALLNACHT is the name of that night…I'm not Jewish either…[pause]… Any other questions?

Q: Could you explain a little bit about the film with the really old footage in it?

C: The really old old footage, LOOSE ENDS, is what it's called. I started out with almost nothing in my mind about what was going to happen. And I had an experience at Filmex last year. One night there was a very interesting film about death made by some French people [Strand is referring to *Of the Dead* (19XX) by the Belgian, Thierry Zeno]. Several scenes that went on for a long time about death in one way or another, and one of the first was, I think in Southeast Asia; a woman had died, and the camera stays with the woman all through the funeral ceremonies which took about five days. So during the course of the five days, very close up of the woman, we see her face begin to decay. At the end of the five days, five cattle are brought and slaughtered, speared through the neck. Everybody in the audience, oooohhh, ooooohhh…was very upset. OK, the film goes on…goes to Mexico City and we see a guy dying of a knife wound, we go to India and see really close up a funeral pyre and the corpse being blackened, consumed by fire. And it's very hard to sit through this. We go to the Philippine Islands and see a guerilla kill one of his comrades after talking to him about how they've been good comrades and he doesn't like to do it but after all, the first guy betrayed. After the film, going out into the lobby, the thing most people talked about was how awful it was to see those five cows killed. And that really threw me for a loop. That's the significance of the horse that gets it in my film. To set you up in a way; because everyone goes ooooooohh with the horse and the theater is perfectly quiet later on with starving people, bodies getting thrown into pits. It's sort of a strange thing, I think we don't like to think about human death… Besides, it's us, we do it to ourselves…but we don't really, kids don't do it, other people don't do it. So, as the film evolved I realized that I had something of a statement…my own feelings about starvation… 12 million people this year will die of starvation…

Q: I thought it was two movies in a way.

C: There are a lot of different sections. Sure it's all…it's me there. Ada Adams, the clumsy student is me and Miss Brown the teacher is me…

Q: The film reminded me a lot of LAND WITHOUT BREAD, that attitude of…

C: Yeah, I've had somewhat that attitude too. And I like Buñuel a lot. But it's a hard film to explain. You either get it or you don't.

Q: LOOSE ENDS to me had…a kind of an uncontemporary feel and I like this quality. Just the fact that it's in black and white. Have you got any comment on that, and also how do your audiences, say under 25, react to it?

C: Ah, being a teacher I find that the new bunch of freshmen that are coming in don't have the background, they don't even really know what happened in the sixties. So it's difficult…but they get it somehow. They get an impact but they don't get all the nuances, or all the tricks I play, or all the relationships; but that's OK, I don't care. I want a film that everybody or most people can relate to and they don't have to catch the inside jokes. Now what was the first part of the question?

Q: That kind of answers it…it was that the sense was very intentional. I was reminded of some of the early Bruce Conner stuff. Just because it was a film collage; it's a mood and a thing I don't see people doing anymore.

C: Bruce Conner's A MOVIE was one of the first experimental films I saw back in the early sixties; I really liked it and I like it to this day. It was very hard for me to say to myself, it's all right to use stock footage, that's Bruce Conner's scene. My feeling was, I've got all this stuff and it would really be dumb not to do it my way. I still like his work very much and 5:10 TO DREAMLAND sets up a mood and is very beautiful.

Q: Where did you get all the fantastic material in LOOSE ENDS and CARTOON LE MOUSSE?

C: I work at this school and they had a film library that nobody ever used; and a secretary's husband had 12 big reels of old stuff he used to show his family, old newsreels and cartoons and things. So I had thousands and thousands of feet of it. I thought it would be fun to make a movie with it, see if I could make something out of the puzzle. I understand there's another bunch of film hidden away on campus that I'm going to search for.

Q: Where do you get your music? Do you write some of it?

C: No. it's all stolen. I can't write but now I'm going to take a music class cause I think it's time… I want to start doing my own music.

Q: Where do you find your music?

C: Oh, various places. I record a lot, in the field and from records…and also this school had a radio station at one time so it had a whole lot of tapes of very obscure things, I guess I work like a collagist in music as well as images, from found things. I get all of my material together and look at it over and over and over and then I pick out the things I think I might use. And then I just start. I usually edit…I almost do a fine cut right away and lay three tracks at the same time, and it just falls. I don't know why, it just works that way. Then I take things out, change them around later. If I knew what I was going to do beforehand I'd be bored. To me it's a new adventure every time. And every time I really plan on something, it looks blaaah.

Q: With all that material from other films, do you have the kind of access where you can cut it directly or do you contact print it?

C: I had a print, this old crappy print, it was real brittle and stretched, that had been in the library for years and years. And I had a student whose father owns an optical effects house in Hollywood, so he ran off a master from it with a wet-gate. I had to blow up some of it because the frame line showed, or slow it down, step it, things like that...(pause)... Any other questions?... Gee, I came, 500 miles...from Hollywood.

Q: Has Hollywood influenced what you do?

C: When I first went to L.A., I had decided to go to film school because I wanted to learn how to use the equipment, that's the usual reason why a lot of people go...and I lived in Berkeley at the time. I actually threw the I Ching to ask it if it would be cool for me to go to L.A... Yeah, sure, I've lived there fifteen years now and I'm really a Southern Californian. If is a different life down there, so sure it has influenced me.

Q: You said you're working on new films and you went back to Mexico. Are they more like your other Mexican films?

C: Well, sort of. I got hooked into making another film about Anselmo, the guy that was in COSAS DE ME VIDA; and this is a continuation of that, more or less, deeper inside of him, his wife and family, and the woman that he has two other children by. We're real close. And two or three other films, abstract kinds of things...I think. I haven't seen most of the footage, I've been too poor to have it developed. I had some of it developed but it's been sitting in an icebox for a long time and it was real hot for about two or three months so the color's real strange. I don't know if I like it or hate it but I'll live with it.

Q: What's your attraction to Mexico?

C: My attraction to Mexico? Well it's right down the freeway from L.A., number one, so it's easy to run off down there. I went there about fifteen years ago and I just got into it. To me, Mexico is surrealism...just being there. It's a different culture, it's beautiful, it's just incredible to be there.

Q: I'm curious to know what you were doing in SOFT FICTION with the scene where the woman was reading the letter about the cowboy. There was a strange tension set up because this woman was a victim, yet she enjoyed it or she was trying to make light of it, there was an element of humor interjected and I wondered about that.

C: Are you sure she was a victim?

Q: Um...yeah.

C: Why?

Q: Because she wasn't in control of what she was doing. She didn't want to, she felt questionable.

C: Well why did she go up there in the first place?

Q: Well, that's what I'm asking you.

C: I'm not her. [audience laughter]

Q: Could you say how you feel about that scene?

C: Sure, not only do I have sexual fantasies about other women but I also have sexual fantasies about several men at once. Don't you?

Q: Uh huh.

C: To me, that story is a sexual fantasy lived out...and ah, sort of a freeing kind of thing. I know for a fact that it was a freeing thing for her.

Q: That was a true story?

C: That is a true story. But it's not just the experience, it's how she came out of the experience, what she did with the experience, made it a constructive part of her life rather than destructive part of her life. It's that tenacity, that kind of spirit that I'm really enamored of. Like Anne Frank. To turn it around and not to have been victimized. I mean it doesn't erase the thing but if you come out whole, if you come out no longer the victim in your own mind, then that's great. You've gotta survive the best way you can.

Q: So did you get a lot of footage and edit it out?

C: Only Cameron and Amy.

Q: Could you tell us about Cameron?

C: Cameron is a very interesting woman. She's a painter. She's the woman in SOFT FICITON who talked about the young girl with the flush face and who had a man who wanted to marry her, who gave her his memory. Well that's a true story of Cameron's, more or less. Cameron first appeared in Kenneth Anger's INAUGURATION OF THE PLEASURE DOME as a young woman. So that's another reason Hollywood influences me, because I know people like that, years later. And Amy is the one that told me the story about the LSD trip. It was just too incoherent. [audience laughter] She came over. She phoned me up the next morning and said, "I'm just out of the hospital. I had a terrible acid trip. I'm going to come right over and tell you." But she was still up and the tape isn't good. Well, those were the women I found and those were the women I used. Just those. I didn't go out looking. I just waited and they came to me; so in that way the rodeo thing also belonged.

Q: Was that the first time the woman had read that cowboy letter?

C: Yes. She'd never seen it and she doesn't know the woman who wrote it.

Q: I'm wondering if maybe the tension that was set up was a voyeur quality.

C: Of course it is! I mean sitting here is a voyeur kind of thing. Yeah, in fact afterward she and I talked about it, the woman who read the letter and I. And I asked her if she ever felt like that and that's why she smiled at the end, that knowing smile. [audience laughter] I don't know, I don't know whether this stuff's supposed to come out about women.

Q: How was it set up that she was the one to read it?

C: She's a handwriting expert that I know and I had this idea that she would analyze the writing. I gave her a part of the letter that had nothing to do with the story and filmed her analyzing this woman's handwriting. Well, it was interesting but...enh...what she did was to automatically read the letter and comment on the writing as she read... Does that scene bother anybody?

Q: It bothers me because it hits really close to home...those kind of fantasies that are semi-masochistic...and I don't know how I feel about that...

C: You mean your own thoughts about it?

Q: Um hmmm.

C: Well, here, just call me Abby, but...[audience laughter] You've got them and everybody does, not everybody but a lot of us do, so it's all right. [audience laughter] I don't see it as masochistic as much as an exploration... It's just that some people don't see the difference between wanting to explore and wanting to be hurt in some way... It's what society says we can't do, have sex in a dark dormatory room with a bunch of cowboys who seem to have the upper hand, that turns us on the most... And I suspect that in your fantasies...putting yourself in a situation where you aren't actually forced, but more or less have an excuse not to be able to get out of it, so as to be able to carry it through in your mind with a clear conscience. What I think the problem is, is that if we admit to these things, we seem to be laying ourselves wide open to the myth that women want to be raped.

But it's not the same thing as rape. Rape is a violent power trip... But be smart about it, don't say, well I like this so here I am, kind of thing. It's all right...and it isn't. I mean it's just part of, I can't say human nature because it's maybe our culture, western culture particularly, but...it's OK.

Q: Why did you use the song "Death of a Maiden" at the end?

C: Why did I use it? Well I have this other friend who is the wife of one of my colleagues at school, who sings, and I saw her sing one night and I said, "Cathy, would you sing for my film?"

And she said, "OK." I told her to pick out a song, and that's the song she picked knowing nothing about the film. [audience laughter]

Q: Would you choose to have that kind of ruthless lighting regardless of what she might have sung?

C: Yes. I shot it on the stage at school. It had dark curtains, I wanted her to come from the dark, a pale face. She was the one that chose to wear the black dress. I'm not very good with lighting, I just sort of put it at 45 degree angles to the side.

Q: The lighting turned out to be very appropriate to the song.

C: I think so, yeah. I used my eye, and it looked right. I don't like to carry around a lot of stuff, like lights. So it was all a set-up job on the tripod.

Q: What were the subtitles from?

C: In LOOSE ENDS they come from LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD. In the Anne Frank film it's haiku. In SOFT FICTION the only subtitles were the words to the song.

Q: You said you weren't gay and you weren't Jewish, what else is there...ah, what's your cultural background?

C: I'm really WASP. Both sides of my family came to the United States in the 1600's, came through New York and the midwest and into California. I'm a fourth generation Californian; and none of them ever made it. None of them ever got rich. My great-grandfather was here in 1849 and then decided to go to Calusa, California and be a farmer, dirtfarming. That is my cultural background. I was brought up an atheist but my parents were very conservative politically. I was raised in Berkeley.

Q: Very conservative atheists... [audience laughter]

C: Well, see we never ever used the word atheist. My grandmother went to a Methodist Church but my parents never did. They believed in nature I suppose...my mother was a very sweet woman and she would say that God was nature. Yes, they were Goldwater people. We don't talk about politics anymore. My father has never seen any of my films...my mother is no longer alive.

Q: Do you want your father to see your films?

C: No, not particularly. I was going to show him and my mother some of my early films. I brought the projector but my mother was dying. She just didn't have the strength to see them. Now my father relates the rigamarole of setting up the projector with my mother dying and he just cannot bear to do it. I don't blame him.

Q: So he does know that you're a filmmaker?

C: Oh yeah. Just today I flew in and I went to see my father and my stepmother. And today for the first time he asked me definite questions about my films.

Q: This was the first time?

C: This was the first time. When I moved down to L.A. to start studying film I was 34 and I had to ask him for some money, and you know how parents give you money sometimes, with all those strings attached? I remember him telling me, "You'll never be an artist. Don't kid yourself. You should be a teacher." A grammar school teacher. Well, I am a teacher. A college professor and now he's sort of proud. It's probably because I don't bug him anymore. You know when you're young and you're much different from your parents, it gives you great thrills to just really give them a bad time…our righteousness in our twenties. Well I've learned. They don't have to know everything about the way you feel… My father is old now. I want to give him as much comfort about my life and the wonderful things he did that contributed, in ways he doesn't even know, to the happiness I have…

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CONVERSATION WITH CHICK STRAND

[Gunvor Nelson asked for several corrections of typos in her questions, which I made.]

Gunvor: How do you feel about your show last night?

Chick: When you are in that situation people fling questions at you and you answer the best you can…and sort of stumble through it hardly remembering what you did…hoping that you said what you really meant.

G: You are good at answering calmly…

C: I certainly did not used to be! I would get real defensive…

G: …with an edge of irony and humor in your answers where you get both your philosophy and stories across.

C: Well whatever…I don't know about philosophy.

G: …or your personality.

C: That's it! It all comes out eventually but I don't know what I want to amplify.
I get this feeling that we have another role to play that is put upon us by other women… sometimes…by what is expected of women artists…and that is to make films about women and